

Eric Robertson

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Education

PhD Candidate, Economics, University of Virginia May 2026 (expected)
References: Sheetal Sekhri, Sandip Sukhtankar, Kerem Cosar

MA in Economics, University of Virginia December 2021
BA in Economics & Mathematics, University of Virginia May 2017

Fields of Interest

Primary: Development
Secondary: Political Economy, Environment, Economic History

Job Market Paper

“Malthus, Poverty, and Famines in British India”

Abstract: Agencies often fail to implement government programs as intended by policymakers. I investigate how exposure to economic ideas can alter implementation by government agents, focusing on the influence of Malthusian ideas on British bureaucrats in colonial India. In the Malthusian view, poverty and famine are the inevitable consequence of excessive population and their permanent resolution is achieved only through population reduction. Leveraging the death of Malthus at the East India Company College at Haileybury in 1834 as a natural experiment, I find that colonial officials who studied under Malthus implement harsher fiscal policies in response to rainfall shortages, a proxy for income shocks. Malthus-trained administrators provide between 0.10 and 0.25 SD less relief across every common anti-poverty relief measure. The results offer new evidence concerning how economic ideas shape government policy through their influence on bureaucrats.

Working Papers

“The Salt Shock: Scarcity, Substitution, and Surprising Health Spillovers”
(with Sheetal Sekhri, Ramiro Burga, and Sisir Debnath)

Abstract: We study the long-run health impacts of a 19th-century colonial tax that sharply altered salt prices across a fiscal border in British India. To enforce the salt tax, the British built a 2,500-mile customs line, the salt hedge, which raised salt prices and limited access in eastern regions for several decades. Using a spatial regression discontinuity design around the historical hedge, we show that individuals east of the hedge, who faced prolonged exposure to salt scarcity, exhibit lower rates of hypertension and heart disease today. Historical archival records confirm sustained salt price gaps during the hedge’s operation (1836–1879), and contemporary consumption data reveal persistent differences in salt use across regions. Our results uncover a surprising health spillover from an extractive institution, driven by persistent behavioral adaptation in consumption. We highlight a novel pathway through which fiscal policies can leave a long-lasting imprint on health, even after the policy itself has abolished.

“Consequences of Elevated Fluoride Exposure for Cognitive Development ”
(with Sheetal Sekhri, Ryan Brown, Amzad Hossain, Emily Gonzalez, and Rajiv Gupta)

Abstract: We establish causal links between elevated fluoride exposure in drinking water and the cognition and health of children by leveraging local geogenic factors that generate fluoride variation

in household-level drinking water. We consistently find that elevated exposure generates an 8-10% deficit in the general intelligence of children. In addition, the children exposed to high levels of fluoride in their drinking water also have less human capital accumulation, as measured by math and language proficiency tests, worse dental health, and suffer from important physical limitations. We conclude that environmental exposure to elevated fluoride leads to a self-reinforcing cycle of poverty: exposure affects children's cognition and health, leading to adverse inter-generational consequences, depressing economic mobility, and perpetuating inequality.

Work in Progress

“Competitive Selection and Bureaucrat Performance: Evidence from the end of Patronage in British India”

“The Long Run Health Consequences of Early-Life Exposure to Fluoride: Evidence from Mexico”
(with Sheetal Sekhri)

Presentations

Washington Area Development Economics Symposium, Washington, DC	April 2025
LSE Graduate Economic History Seminar, London, UK	May 2024

Teaching Experience

Teaching assistant, UVA:

<i>Environmental Economics (undergraduate)</i>	Spring 2025
<i>Economics of the Environment and Sustainability (undergraduate)</i>	Fall 2024
<i>Behavioral Finance (undergraduate)</i>	Spring 2022, 2023
<i>Theory of Financial Markets (undergraduate)</i>	Fall 2021, 2022

Fellowships and Awards

Bankard Fund for Political Economy Pre-Doctoral Fellowship	2025
Quantitative Collaborative Bynum Grant	2024
Dumas Malone Graduate Research Fellowship	2023
Tipton R. Snavelly Fund Prize for the Best Dissertation Proposal	2023

Research and Other Activities

Student organizer, Bankard Workshop in Development Economics, University of Virginia	2024-2025
Visiting Research Student, London School of Economics and Political Science	2023-2024
Quantitative Collaborative Graduate Student Affiliate	2023-2025
Research Assistant to Professor Sandip Sukhtankar, University of Virginia	2019-2020
Research Assistant to Professor Sheetal Sekhri, University of Virginia	2017-2019

Professional Service

Referee for *Journal of Public Economics*, *Journal of Law and Economics*, *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*